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A - Canby, Vincent

Sec. 4.01.4 The Confession

London, Arthur

Screen:

Montand and Signoret Star in 'Confession'

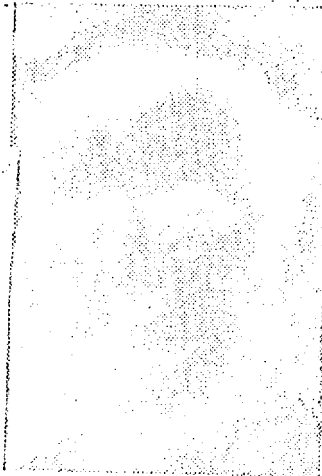
By VINCENT CANBY

"The Confession" is the real-life story of Arthur London, a loyal Communist who certified his credentials by serving with the International Brigade in Spain and with the Communist anti-Nazi underground in France, and by a long term in a Nazi concentration camp. In 1949, Mr. London returned to his native Czechoslovakia from France to become Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the Communist Government of President Klement Gottwald. Two years later, along with 13 other leading Czech Communists (11 of whom were Jewish), Mr. London was arrested for treason and espionage and found guilty in what became known as the "Slansky trial."

The Slansky trial, named for the secretary general of the Czech Communist party, who was also a defendant, was one of the last major gasps of the Stalinist purges that began with the Moscow trials in the 1930's. All of the Slansky defendants were found guilty and all but three, including Mr. London, were executed.

Mr. London lived not only to see the defendants rehabilitated and to write his book but also to return to Czechoslovakia on the day in August, 1963, when Soviet troops invaded his country to end the short Czech spring.

"The Confession," with Yves Montand playing Mr.



Yves Montand

The Cast

"THE CONFESION," directed by Costa-Gavras; screenplay (French with English subtitles) by Jean Seznac; based on a story by Lisa and Arthur London; director of photography, Raoul Coutard; produced by Robert Dorfman and Richard Jewell; edited by Raymond Pictures. At the Parkway Theater, Second Avenue at 69th Street, running times: 123 minutes. (The Motion Picture Association of America's Production Code and Rating Administration disallows this film "GP—All ages admitted, parental guidance suggested.")
 Gerard Yves Montand
 Lisa Simone Signoret
 Klement Gabriel Byrne
 Smole Michel Wildgen
 Hess Jane Fonda

London and Simone Signoret his wife Lisa, is the story of a believer's ultimate betrayal by his belief, of intolerable physical torture and psychological harassment (London is urged to confess to crimes he did not commit to prove his loyalty to the party), and, finally, of survival.

It is a harrowing film of intellectual and emotional anguish, dramatized by the breathless devices of melodrama. Costa-Gavras employs abrupt jump cuts and flashes forward as well as back. He underscores the desperation of the meeting of some hunted man in a private apartment with the sounds of children roughhousing in the next room. It may, in fact, be one of the most aurally resonant movies I've ever seen. It is full of ordinary sounds made somehow ominous, like the slamming of doors (car, house, prison) and footsteps (on wood, brick, concrete).

Its color photography by Raoul Coutard is also fine (natural overhead light in all the interiors), even when resorting to the zoom, which can be a legitimate tool in melodrama. Beginning with Mr. Montand and Miss Signoret, it is perfectly cast. One really responds to the faces, the attitudes and gestures in a Costa-Gavras film, as when, during the trial, the trousers of one of the emaciated defendants fall to the floor and he turns to the court with an expression of hopeless, perfectly confused laughter and despair.

"The Confession" is a film of movement and sensation, as was "Z," but there is at its center a complex human

being. Like the book, it is an anti-Stalinist rather than anti-Communist polemic (Mr. London has written that he is interested in putting "a human face" on national socialism). One tends to forget the context of the London's experience—the totality of a belief that would prompt a wife to denounce a husband that she has loved for almost 20 years, simply because the Party had to be right.

You might not know it from the film, but the Londons are different from you and me—and from Arthur Koestler, whose disenchantment came earlier (1937) and was more complete. In a recent interview, Mr. Koestler recalled the blind party discipline that he eventually denied as he quoted Andre Malraux: "A life is worth nothing, but nothing is worth a life." Because this is also the essence of "The Confession," I liked it very much, even when its form is in combat with its substance.